WASHTENAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY—Founded December 19, 1857

Washtenaw Impressions

JANUARY 1975

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Here's wishing each and everyone of you a happy and prosperous 1975.

As we reflect on the accomplishments of the WHS during the past calendar year, we are able to glean satisfaction from many things. The highlight of 1974 is the restoration of the Lucy Clark Piano and the thrill we all felt as Mr. Bartlett and Mrs. Groomes unveiled it on December 19th. When Professor Pickut played his "petite concert" we all realized fully the importance of the beautiful treasure. Our deepest thanks to Lela Duff, Herb Bartlett, Katherine Groomes, Leigh Anderson, Kurt Pickut and all the other members who have participated in the restoration of the piano. We have restored an important bit of history to Washtenaw County. The brass plaque which identifies it was placed on the piano by Leigh Anderson last week. It is on display in the lobby of AAFS if you have not had a chance to see it yet.

We took a big step forward in October when the membership approved an offer to purchase the Parker Mill and enough land to build our museum. These negotiations are still in progress. We added seventy new members to our roster; we established a genealogy section; we participated in the Dexter and Ann Arbor Sesquicentennial celebrations; we had interesting meetings and good fellowship.....and we look forward to even greater accomplishments in 1975.

Hazel Proctor, President

ANN ARBOR'S FIRST PIANO, BROUGHT BY OX TEAM IN 1827, RESTORED, PLAYED AS SPECIAL SURPRISE

The special surprise at the W.H.S. December meeting was the unveiling and playing of the newly restored "Chapin" piano which arrived in Ann Arbor in 1827 by ox team, the first piano west of Detroit.

Then fascinated Potawatomie Indians danced to its soft melodies as played by its owner then, Lucy Ann Clark. In 1974, its sweet tones again were heard by the assembled audience as well as the "eyes and ears" of local television. Channel 3.

It took some detective work and a lot of restoration to make the recent event possible.

The complete restoration of the piano was almost a miracle to those who saw its condition a year and a half ago. It was accomplished after untold hours of painstaking work by two very dedicated men who very generously donated their time and special skills to the Society.

Leigh C. Anderson, U-M professor emeritus of chemistry, repaired and restored the case. Kurt W. Pickut, associate professor and director of paino technology in the U-M School of Music, repaired and rebuilt the mechanism or action.

Herbert H. Bartlett and Mrs. I. William Groomes unveiled it. Mrs. Paul Kempf was first to play it, then Prof. Pickut.

Mrs. Kempf played the same little musical number she had played on it once before in 1927. At that time she accompanied a friend on an errand to Miss Lucy Chapin's house at 803 Kingsley Street. Miss Chapin asked her to play.

Miss Chapin, a granddaughter of the original owner, Lucy Ann Clark, willed the piano to the society. After her death in 1940 it was placed in the University Stearns Collection, unmarked and all but forgotten.

Thirty years later a concerned Lela Duff found no one knew which [illegible] Bartlett of the Society Board of Directors began a search for documentary evidence. There was the will and evidence the piano had been placed with the University but it was a photograph of the piano in Miss Chapin's papers in the Michigan Historical Collections which proved conclusively that the only Kearsing piano in the Stearns Collection was Miss Chapin's.

Perhaps many readers are familiar with the story that Lucy Ann Clark insisted on bringing her piano with her to this outpost of civilization, when she came with her mother and brother in 1827, and of how its music charmed the indians.

Indeed, Chapman's History of Washtenaw County, 1881, tells that "on one occasion one of the chiefs was strenuous in his efforts to exchange half a dozen ponies for the instrument and its fair performer..."

On a more sedate note, Miss Duff in "Ann Arbor Yesterdays" thinks Lucy probably accompanied on it the first hymns sung by the new little congregation of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. The church was organized in 1828 in her mother's home.

Lucy Ann married James Kingsley and their daughter, Frances E. married Charles A. Chapin. Their children, Volney and Lucy inherited the piano.

LUCY CHAPIN'S LEGACY MUCH MORE THAN A PIANO

By Nan Hodges

While you listened to the delicate tone of the newly restored Lucy Clark piano, did you realize that its donor, Miss Lucy E. Chapin, had given an even more important legacy to the Washtenaw Historical Society? Along with the piano, Lucy Chapin left to the Society sixty-five years of personal curiosity about Ann Arbor's social history.

Among the Chapin papers housed in many boxes in the Michigan Historical Collections at the Bentley Library are eight scrapbooks compiled by Lucy Chapin from 1875 to 1940. These scrapbooks contain original documents, newspaper clippings, letters, sketches and photos from newspapers, postcards and snapshots arranged according to subject.

Two "Souvenir Notebooks" have carefully clipped and dated newspaper advertisements from 1830 to 1880 of nearly every merchant, artisan, doctor, lawyer, school or public auction in Ann Arbor. One can find everything from bathtubs to Chinese laundries. To see so many early newspapers destroyed is enough to make an archivist weep, but at the same time admire the way in which Miss Lucy shows commercial life in 19th century Ann Arbor.

In a brown bookkeeper's ledger programs of theatre and music give an indication of the variety of entertainment in Ann Arbor in the 1880's. On a December night in 1885 one cannot only surmise that Miss Lucy went to see the great "New York Success", entitled "Wanted--A Divorce!" (a French comedy), but that she perhaps strolled along to A. F. Hangsterfer's for after theatre refreshments including "Oysters in every style!"

Other scrapbooks cover church history, education, architecture and pioneer life in Ann Arbor, to name only a few subjects.

Perhaps the two most revealing scrapbooks about Lucy Chapin herself are those she compiled between 1875 and 1896. In 1875 she had just graduated from Ann Arbor High School. She began the job which was to occupy her for the next 42 years--assistant to the Secretary of the University of Michigan.

But what was Miss Lucy really like outside the office?

First of all she was frugal. Her first scrapbook covering the years 1875-1884 was made from a printed book called "Joint Documents, 1877". It was a thick, leather-bound volume with fine paper which contained reports from commissions appointed by the House and Senate of the Michigan State Legislature. Somehow Miss Lucy acquired an extra copy and proceeded to paste over every page newspaper clippings, sketches, poetry, wedding invitations and EVERY University Commencement Week program from 1877 onward.

There is almost no reference to Lucy Chapin or her accomplishments in these books, but the beginning of her interest in recording Ann Arbor's past is clearly indicated.

The first scrapbook begins with a schoolgirl's collection of poetry, both amusing and maudlin, interspersed with sketches clipped from "Harper's" of romantic little girls and elegant ladies of fashion. Among these rather idyllic items there are clippings of sketches of buildings--the new Washtenaw County Courthouse, the State Capitol and the buildings of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. If a state report showed pictures of the University or public schools in Ann Arbor, she merely pasted over the text, leaving the illustrations in the "Joint Documents" to become part of her scrapbook. Recording architecture became important to Miss Lucy early in her life.

On August 17, 1878, James Kingsley, Lucy Clark's husband and Lucy Chapin's grandfather died. Lucy Chapin included every obituary she could find. Perhaps her family's place in early Ann Arbor history prompted her to continue this technique of recording local history. One of her later scrapbooks includes obituaries of every pioneer who died during her lifetime.

A tiny clipping dated July 9, 1884, tells of Miss Lucy Chapin leaving for a trip to Washington, D.C., and Connecticut. She includes railroad timetables, pictures of scenic views along the way, a map of Washington and pages of historic articles on George Washington and Mt. Vernon. This trip probably broadened her interest in history and historic buildings.

A second scrapbook in "Joint Documents, 1875," begins in 1886. Here we see a more mature Miss Lucy, totally involved with her life on campus. It is filled with invitations to lectures, concerts and fraternal functions. It has an excellent collection of mementoes from the University's Semi-Centennial Celebration in 1887.

Miss Lucy also joins the summer exodus to Northern Michigan, via the steamers of the Detroit and Cleveland Steam Navigation Co. from Detroit to Cheboygan. Illustrated brochures of the steamers and magazine articles on Bay View and Petoskey

follow timetables marked by an efficient red pencil. An invitation for "Progressive Euchre" at one of the summer cottages is pasted alongside a souvenir birchbark wristband threaded with lacy white ribbon.

The romantic quality lingers in this portion of the scrapbook only to be ended by a small clipping in September, 1888, "Secretary Wade and his pleasant lady assistant have their hands full of business just now registering the students..."

Less poetry and more commencements follow.

In 1896 the scrapbook ends with clippings and programs of the "Second Annual Reunion and Banquet of the Teachers and Pupils of the Ann Arbor High School from 1856-1876." It is twenty years later and Lucy Chapin has a responsible position in University life and in the Ann Arbor High School Alumni Association. She also has established the dominant theme of her life--the need to collect and record the complete history of life in Ann Arbor.

Unfortunately this rich source of local history can scarcely be used in its present state. The scrapbooks are in pieces and brittle newsprint and yellowing glue are adding to the problems of preservation. This material could easily be transferred to microfilm at the Bentley Library. The Washtenaw Historical Society should give priority to the preservation of this valuable legacy.

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SECTION PLANS PROGRAMS

The program committee of the genealogy group of W.H.S. is presently setting up monthly programs through June. Polly Bender heads the committee. Plans for the February meeting were not definite at press time.

'BASKET CASE' REBUILT

The mahogany luster and sweet tones of the Lucy Clark Kingsley paino gave little hint of all the work that preceded the recent concert.

When the piano was removed from the Stearns Collection in the fall of 1973 it was found that time and atmospheric conditions had played havoc with the case and mechanism.

Much of the cabinet inlay had come unglued and fallen away, the shelf underneath was loose, two of the brass casters would not turn and all the brass was black with tarnish, according to a report by Alloa and Leigh Anderson.

Most of the strings were missing and those left were rusted and useless; the felt and leather parts of the mechanism were crumbled to dust. In the words of a physician who looked over the piano, the whole was "a basket case".

This piano is a small instrument called a square piano. It was built by Jonn Kearsing & Son of 279 Bowery Lane, New York, between 1814 and 1816, Prof. Pickut says.

The square piano, invented in the mid-1700's, was especially suited to home use with its smaller size and small tone volume. Stronger and louder modern pianos were made possible by engineering improvements, especially as cast iron frames.

The upright piano replaced the square piano in homes and by 1875, the Clark-Chapin piano was described as a "square-shaped odd looking instrument, which, on inquiry, was said to be a piano, though it possesses few, if any, features common to these instruments now-a-days."

It was so described in the Washtenaw County History account of Ann Arbor's semi-centennial celebration on Feb. 24, 1875. (Apparently that celebration was a year late!)

The piano is now on display at the main office of Ann Arbor Federal Savings & Loan, Liberty at Division Streets.

While its tone is soft to modern ears, the vibrations emanating from the box as it jogged over bumps behind the oxen alarmed the teamster John Anderson so much he didn't want to unload it when he got it to Ann Arbor.

The Clarks had acquired it for $75. Its restoration would have cost several thousands had the work not been donated.

LUCY ANN'S FRIENDS BID HER ADIEU IN 1826 ALBUM

Lucy Ann Clark, the original owner of the Chapin piano, apparently went from finishing school to frontier within a year. Can anyone blame her for wanting her piano as she faced this drastic change in lifestyle?

Lucy Ann's album dated 1826, now among the papers of Lucy Chapin, her granddaughter, in the Michigan Historical Collections, suggests the genteel surroundings from which she came.

In the album Lucy had her classmates at Harmony Hall College in New Haven, Conn., copy their favorite poems in their beautiful script. Selections from Byron, Burns, Cowper, Goldsmith were among favorite poets selected by Lucy's friends.

The poems are signed with name and address of the friend and the date. So many poems of farewell are chosen that it is obvious she is leaving New Haven.

Young students at Yale College added their selections to the album. Many of the poems praise beauty, friendship and womankind. Others reflected the romantic melancholy of the period, dwelling on death and the triumph of the moral person over death.

Lucy Ann's name is engraved in gold on the cover.

VOLUNTEER HELP NEEDED

Are there any members of the Washtenaw Historical Society who would be willing to volunteer a few hours a month keylining "Washtenaw Impressions" for the printer?

Its simply a matter of cutting and pasting the set copy into page form ready for the printer. No experience is needed as Thomas Lacy, Sr., has offered to train willing volunteers and make facilities available for the work at Drury, Lacy Inc., 332 S. Ashley Street, Ann Arbor.

For further information please telephone Alice Ziegler, Editor, 663-8826; or Mr. Lacy, 662-5593.

BENEDICT ARNOLD'S MARCH RETRACED BY SPEAKER

Douglas Marshall, Curator of maps and newspapers at the University's Clements Library, will take us on a slide tour "Retracing Benedict Arnold's March on Quebec" at the W.H.S. January meeting at 8 p.m. Thursday, January 23.

The meeting will be in Liberty Hall in Ann Arbor Federal Savings & Loan, Liberty at Division Streets, Ann Arbor.

Marshall retraced the march step by step with a pack on his back in the summer of 1973 through still rugged wilderness areas of Maine and Quebec.

IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Prof. Pickut turned the almost impossible dream into reality when he restored the Clark-Chapin piano to playing condition.

Prof. Pickut completely restored it himself, putting finishing touches on it the day before the meeting. He is one of few living persons who know how to rebuild the action or mechanism of the square piano.

In token of grateful thanks, the society presented him a plaque making him a life member.

The problems he faced were many. The sounding board was loose and broken.. Not only did he have to replace all 136 strings, he had to calculate a suitable stringing scale first.

Many other parts were replaced and rebuilt. Harpsichord tuning pins, the finest organ pouch leather and felt used in Steinway pianos were among the items used.

CALENDAR

Dexter Historical Society--7:30 p.m. Thursday. Jan. 23, at Wylie School Cafetorium. The Boy Scout Wolverine Council Order of the Arrow Indian Dance Team will perform and Indian crafts will be on display. The dance team, composed of a dozen boys from several communities, trys to make its dancing as authentic as possible.

Mrs. Virginia Allshouse is president of the newly chartered Chelsea Area Historical Society.

The group has incorporated as a non-profit organization. About 40 persons signed as charter members at the December meeting.

Mrs. Diane Borton is vice-president; Mrs. Marie Petsch, secretary; and Mrs. Alice Thornton, treasurer. Elected directors are Dr. Wilfrid Lane, Harold Jones and Mrs. Marjorie Daniels.

Meetings are scheduled at 8 p.m. the second Monday of each month in the women'sclub room of the McKune Library on Main Street. The group plans to set-up historical displays in the community. It also hopes to find a home to.use for a museum.

MILAN ELECTS OFFICERS

The Milan Historical Society recently elected the following officers for the coming year: Warren R. Hale, President; Oliver Curry, Vice-President; Mrs. Nancy Burger, Secretary; Mrs. Carol Smith, treasurer; and Ken Baumann to the board of directors. The board is composed of the above persons plus Jack Cullip, Arleigh Squires and Iva Sanford whose terms continue.

The group meets the third Wednesday of each month at the Milan Community House.

Washtenaw Historical Society Meeting
JANUARY 23, 1975
8:00 P.M.
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